Richard Meltzer

GUIDE
To The
UGLIEST
BUILDINGS
of Los Angeles

Meltzer
Richard Meltzer's Guide to the ugliest buildings of Los Angeles
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SPECIAL COLLECTIONS ROOM

GUIDE To The UGLIEST BUILDINGS of Los Angeles

To my parents (both).

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DEAR out-of-towner/out-of-stater/foreigner as the case may be: Have we got ugly 4-U! Yes . . . give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore—and, hey, we will turn their tum.

And yours as well.

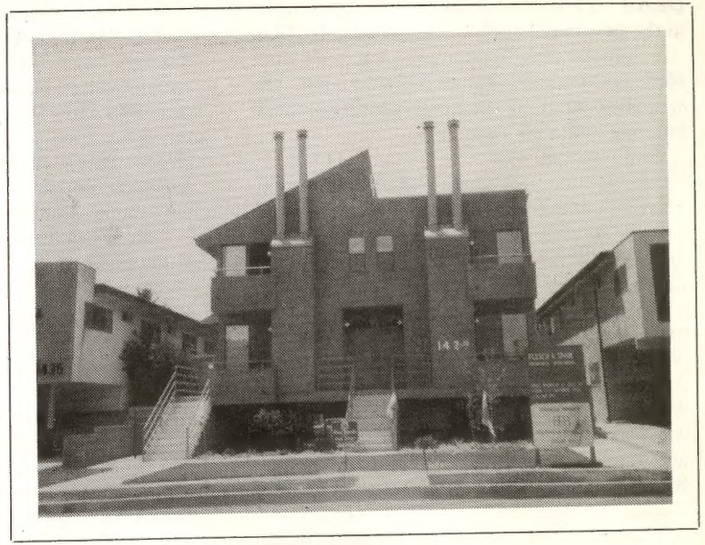
At least our buildings will—a guarantee. They will also: *shock* your nervous system, *jar* your endocrine organs, *rankle* your sensibility, even—if you're "hip," "hep" or simply, merely "with it"—*tickle* your ugly bone. For, as Hugo Van Goggen so aptly puts it in his preface to *The Cyclopedia of Hideous Architecture* (combined European and North American editions, 1981), "There exist [in Los Angeles] constructions for habitation and commerce far, *far* more aesthetically, morally and spiritually repugnant than the Chrysler Building, the Great Pyramid and the Eiffel Tower put together."

Together is the way [in Los Angeles] things are often put. In the most "fortuitous" of configurations; at the least "opportune" of moments.

So hurry, quick, do not delay: into your car/cab/bus and out to the bldgs. described in this here book. Right this moment, for inst, as we literally go to press, being *put* on the lawn of Rather Ugly Residence, 2116 W. Washington Blvd. (see p. 22), is a Quite Mediocre Drapery Store that will in all likelihood *permanently obscure* your view of the former's Ugglehood/Residential Incarnate.

L.A. is not exactly Big on the permanence of anything. E.g., "small" business, examples of which abound—facadewise—in the pages to follow. But allow not mere facade to fool or confuse you. Just because a surface or surfaces appear *putrid* to the unaided eye, judge not the *bizness* heart of person or persons whose *ventures* occupy same. For—this is true—in our purt-near Paradise wherein worker and (so-called) millionaire rub destiny elbows left and/or right, not one instance of Rotten Capitalism has reared its head in So. Cal. proper since 1938.

So, hey, patronize an eyesore—you'll be glad you did!



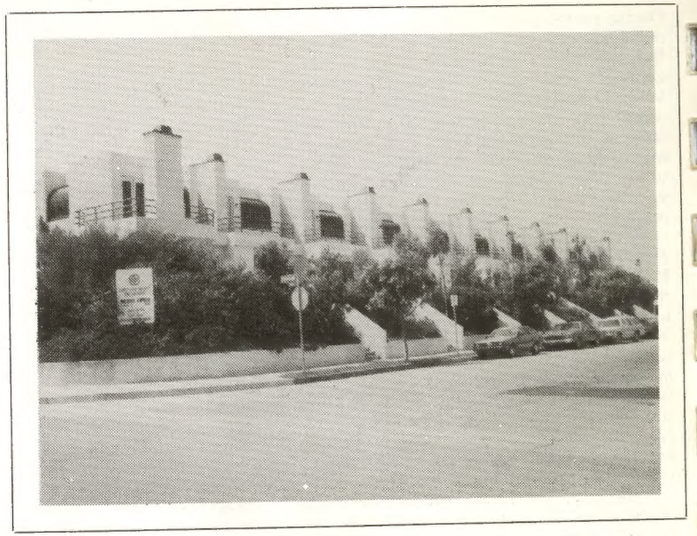
One Big Hunk of Genre

APARTMENT BUILDING

1429 S. Bundy Drive, West Los Angeles

On the second page of *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, author Reyner Banham chides somebody else's earlier, avowedly all-inclusive work on the subject for including "neither hamburger bars and other Pop ephemerae on one end, nor freeway structures and other civil engineering on the other." Well, Reyner baby, I certainly gave *you* an open-minded read but you must've not driven too far yourself; you missed one big hunk of genre I was hoping you'd've not—the factories and warehouses of industrial L.A. Exit south off the Santa Monica Freeway at Alameda or Santa Fe Avenue, turn left on Vernon or anything north of Slauson, and you're smack in the heart of the most consistently interesting—even (dare I say it?) downright *lovely*—section of man-made L.A.: functional structure after functional structure, no silly frills around the steaming pipes or crackling electrical relays, and (with the notable exception of the Farmer John plant, where they probably painted all those smiling piggies on the side to convince the tour-bused schoolkids that pork is glad to be butchered) nary a dreamshuck facade to telegraph corporate pride or candycoat corporate greed. Just a bunch of large, visually striking buildings in which workers and machines make shit.

Scene switches to residential West L.A.: A valuable "plot" earmarked for development: What to do? What *these* buzzards evidently did was slum their way through Alameda/Vernon a couple-three times, spend long nights scratching their heads over how to "tame the beast," superimpose their bold new "ideas" on the standard stucco residence module, and scream to local dickbrains the arrival of Industrial Chic. Ah, such folly! The truncated (i.e., half-assed) sloping roof, the double pair of gratuitously (i.e., farcically) elongated smokestacks: Just as pure residential *forms* these yuk-yuks could conceivably be enough (in tandem) to make this the ugliest *new* building in all of L.A. Throw in the colors these losers opted for—an "industrial gray" for the stucco that some wiseass might alternately call "Dennis the Menace dirty towel" and a blue for the stacks hovering between that of a Vita-Pakt grapefruit juice top and the somewhat deeper one on the McDonald's Centipede gamecard—and you're looking at the ugliest *building* from here to Vegas (at least).



Security Chic

ESPLANADE DEL REY TOWNHOMES

112/114/118/120/124/126/130/132/142 Convoy St., Playa Del Rey

Just when it seemed as if the umpteen-plus-nth generation of what Francis Ventre once dubbed "Basic Los Angeles Dingbat" would be every bit as unrelievedly rectilinear as the first incarnation of the form way back who knows when, along comes the mighty curve to hip us to the fact that softened corners can be just as head-achingly tedious when thrown in the same old migraine-modular hopper. Each of the nine duplex mods in this off-white stucco dingster features curvature both vertical (tinted frontal "skylight") and horizontal (minimal-room "veranda" with three-pipe nautical deck railing). So nauseatingly obvious is the fact of curvature, and so lobotomizing is its actual thematic repetition, that one could easily fail to notice that the eight leftmost mods are unfailingly curved to the right until, suddenly, with the farthest-right unit, the theme is mystifyingly reversed—curve directed inward to the left— presumably to allow both ends of the building to terminate in basic squaresville incarnate. It's almost as if (pick one) the architect was so overjoyed with the theme that he kept drawing identical units over and over until he found himself stuck with a nasty endgame someone less gungho would have foreseen a tad earlier, or, somewhat more likely, the prospect of four-to-the-left/five-to-the-right (or whatever) would've made the unavoidable asymmetry of nine units in *any* sequence a mite too conspicuous—and a mere eight would have meant an 11.1 percent decrease in potential profits.

Plus: "security gates" that only a key or buzz will unlock (no knobs, which presumably makes for *cleaner lines*), but so short that even a dying click beetle could hop over if so inclined (security decor; security chic).

Aztlan Recidivist

STUDIO VILLA

4387/4389/4391/4393/4397/4399 Irvine Ave., Studio City

Another helping of curves for today, only this time they're plain ordn'ry circles—circular windows in eyeball pairs that, one guesses, cannot help but color your world curvilinear even from inside looking out. But since, barring drastically unforeseen circumstances, I'm not likely to ever be even a guest in any of the "luxurious condominiums" that comprise this Valley fever palace, I'll have to confine my observations to the unfettered view from across the street (I'm not Gay Talese, so what the hey). What I see up the middle, even without LSD, is the mind-expansively majestic face of Quetzalcoatl (or one of *them*), his eyes farther distant than those of mortal men, his headdress composed of paired chimneys (or are they a/c ducts?), his nose an unpainted cement protrusion with a single nostril slatted wide to take in healthy gulps of Valley air, dark blue missionesque roof and awning tiles supplying him with all the post-pre-Columbian teeth and plumage his godship could ever need to strut functionally and proudly in modernmost Aztlan. Godhead is eternal (or who put mescaline in which firm's water cooler?).

Ug Enough Alone

ENCHANTED VIEW TOWNHOMES

2677 Centinela Ave., Mar Vista

Curves, shmurves—the *real* new trend in richpeople moron dwellings is wood, enough wood to give the tree-loss caused by the weekly publication of the Sunday *New York Times* a competitive run for its money. There is no stucco (or like-minded substance) on this beauty, just wood-forever and a touch of brick. Both wood and brick have been artificially aged; the building is five minutes old and too far from the Pacific to be credibly sea-seasoned or even shitted on by seagulls, yet it looks like the sturdy survivor of a dozen Huntington Beach winters, summers, and falls. Phonusbalonus is one thing, a thing even the most recalcitrant purists among us have come to know and often love, but hideous framings of window multiples is another matter entirely. And when the windows in question are already as tritely light/dark-juxtaposed as these joke portals, you'd think they'd have the sense to leave ug enough alone. Instead they go and tack designer strips of stained or painted poor dead tree around fours and sixes (of 'em) like basepaths of a Dodger Stadium or Parcheesi board in some dud obsesso's may-the-circle-be-unbroken; next thing you know they'll be numbering (or naming) doors, windows and stairs.

Santa's Misery Box

THE PARK GLEN

2369 S. Beverly Glen Blvd., West Los Angeles

In beige or tan this institutional misery box would be hard to single out from the rest of its ilk (hard but not impossible). But with 80 percent of its metal plates screaming, "Look at us, we're firehouse (barnyard) red!" there's no denying this "stately condominium" its garish uniqueness. The rest of the metal could accurately be called light smog gray, giving the structure the overall protective coloration of a pair of (non-budget-priced) track shoes I was once almost foolish enough to buy. Faintly echoing the red, and giving their combined complexion an aggregate "terra cotta" shading, a central mound of brick ascends (on each of three sides) to twin rectangular chimneys. These are chimneys rather than smokestacks—this is, after all, a sweatshop of only the soul—suggesting the contempo-gotrocks metaphor of (count them) six entry-points for Santa . . . six or seven more than most of us have any longer got. Or am I missing the *real* joke, i.e., Santa = snow = coke? (My funny bone has been sort of numb of late, so what the fug do *I* know?)

Ricochet Metaphors

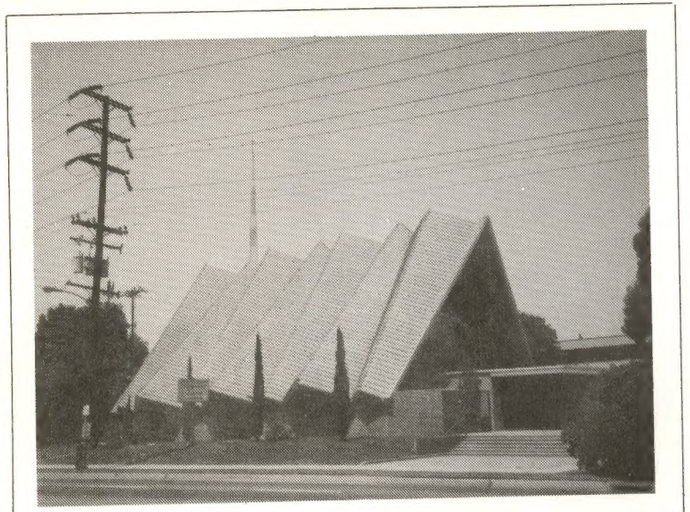
VALLEY STATE BANK

3575 Cahuenga Blvd. West, Universal City

Bricks, bricks and more bricks, only the bricks are fantastic fakes. They're not real nohow, just ten billion tiles made to simulate brickness. Flat, thin, about the thickness of two pieces of linoleum. No role whatsoever in keeping this transplanted grandstand of the Ontario Motor Speedway from keeling over into the dust. Just a flimsy reference to the traditional building blocks of mythically flimsy America. But the architectural "statement" here is not of bricks, real or imagined—it's mirrors. Mirror facades have for too long been perpendicular to sidewalks; all you can use them for is to comb your hair. The reflective surface has finally been tilted; you can now see yourself walking a hundred feet in, geez, the goddam sky (in 1936 Leni Riefenstahl would've given her eyeteeth for this building).

It's a little tricky, though, when you're driving up (or down) Cahuenga—cars seem to be moving vertically and sooner or later some drunk or highway neophyte is bound to end up dead. But from the nearby Hollywood Freeway you can see, reflected, the complete stock of Morrie Sage's Universal City Datsun (whose own visual statement, come to think of it, is built on a series of twenty-foot boomerangs, ricochet metaphors being rather *big* on this one given street). Such a nexus of vehicular images (cars as property reflected onto a highway from the facade of a speedway-motif bank that grants car loans) comes along but once in most people's lifetimes.

Back to the nonbricks that underlie the physical occasion for this nexus, where seemingly permanent metal letters spell out "Lease a Landmark" directly above a sign that says "Leasing Office"—inotherwords there'll *always* be a workspace or eight available (for the business needs of any get-rich-quick generation to come) in this audaciously flimsy capitalist pipedream-made-idiot-flesh.



Gas - Food - Lodging - Worship

UNIVERSITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

5831 Centinela Ave., Westchester

The Tiny Naylor's Pavilion at the 1928 Cubist Accordian World's Fair. "Shingles" that are shingles-naught, because they are, apparently, shingle-textured ceramic tile (in any event, a more convincing simulation than the previous building's "bricks"). "Stained glass" with nary a stain or design, just some artsy-craftsy formless lead-rimmed shards busting hump to refer, one surmises, to classic Euro-silicate "holiness" (while stucco-covered beams — genuine — do the real job of supporting the mess lest it shatter and slice the spleen of Sunday's faithful). And don't forget the galvanized metal "cross" the size of your steering wheel, proud of its sacred lineage (no doubt) but competing with phone lines for even fleeting electromagnetic relevance. The Jesus who sings for his supper in this house of worship would have to be played by the illegitimate son of Irwin Corey and Jeanette MacDonald—or, if we're to keep such blasphemy in rigid scriptural context, the virgin womb-spew of Patty Duke Astin.

Omar's Bathhouse

ISLAMIC CENTER OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

434 S. Vermont Ave., South Hollywood or whatever you call it

It's been many a moon since the first, last, and only L.A. Moorish Revival (whenever that was), or basically *any* local surge of hard-core Islamic-tinged construction. The painting of that Valentino sheik face on the athletic field wall of Hollywood High doesn't really count, nor does Sheik Al-Fassi's late, lamented kitsch mansion on Sunset, which the jerkingtons of Bev Hills could never see as the antiblandout godsend their sorry environs had always been sorely in need of (so fuck 'em, they're dumb). Anyway, it's sure as heck time we had at least *one* distinguished expression of Islam per se somewhere in our midst, like to at least keep pace (in a nutshell) with Islamic ascendancy in the world at large (or whatever). Not to even *mention* all the local real estate *they* might just have the deed to by now, anyway (and all that repulsively paranoid cryptoracist claptrap).

So anyway, finally, here ya go: Could be a bank, could be a, um, museum, could be a city waterworks in Riverside or Pomona. The arches don't support jackshit, and the only quasi-Islamic oompah to 'em (by any stretch of the imagination) is the sickly shimmering embellishment directly beneath: the phosphorescent sparkle of a (larger-than-life) blue plastic shower curtain. "Eastern Exotic" for sure—but you could pull off something just as exotic if you bought two or three at Zodys and hung them on your garage.

Sour Cream on Third

LE HOT TUB CLUB

8054 W. Third St., West Hollywood

From Fairfax Avenue all the way into West Hollywood proper, the forces of developmental b.s. are currently taking long strides toward terminally stripmining Third Street of its cheery unpretentiousness and turning it into a mini-Westwood or alternative Melrose. While it might seem that the recent appearance in this setting of something as patently un-chi-chi, as aregionally crass, as an unadorned hot-tub hole could be viewed as an acceptable makeshift disruption of Plans A and/or B, an eyesore is still an eyesore—and this one takes (and even looks like) the cake. White "icing"—or is it sour cream to stucco's cottage cheese?—thinly veils as shoddy a piece of instant renovation as the time my parents actually thought supermarket dye could change the color of the family couch without chasing people into their respective rooms for keeps. And if *it* can change its spots on (and for) a dime, I can change my metaphors with equally tawdry intent: Ghosts of building past leer out from beneath their threadworn shroud; eyesockets of windows gone blind face the merciless sun with streamers on a string as their only patch; *Wet Mag* chic deadends it as sex-trip sleaze; capitalism-born-of-tears makes the world scream and cry.

Modern Thoughts

RESIDENCE

163/165 S. Berendo St., same "South Hollywood" as before

Okay, you're the proud owner of a standard-issue bearable late-twenties *white Hollywood house* in a neighborhood where mere white houses are so prevailingly cool that only a few blocks away is a street called White House Place, which might've actually been named for the one in D.C. although in this town y'never know. Anyway, so far so good. Then suddenly it's the late fifties and you're feeling like this otherwise still-bearable dwelling of yours is suddenly thirty years out of sync with all the fabulous new crap that's sprouting like wildfire from here to Malibu. It bothers you to think of your digs as being on the ancient side, sure, but that's not really the whole story (Sputniks and Disneylands're going up and, well, all this *modern thinking* is kind of contagious).

You decide to *modernize*—heck, it might even raise the property value—but out of lingering respect for the "old values" (Ike is after all Prez), not to mention your pocket book (his second term *has* been privy to a mild "recession"), you opt to do it as cheaply and painlessly as possible. So you call in some asshole with sound credentials in nouveau dingbat filigree and he sells you a whale of a renovation that, it turns out, will never look dated. A simple right-angled post-Mondrian black metal chassis is affixed above the central arch with a smaller whatsis to the left and additional rectangles of red, yellow, and blue to give the building a little much-needed "color." Hey (your asshole has convinced you), this mod-rin ay-simmer-tree is not half bad—especially the way it lends things the right amount of "compositional flair," throws everything into a state of "dynamic opposition." Who knows, maybe *Better Homes* will even salute you with a feature . . . .

Exothalmic Angst or the Need for Separate Exits

RESIDENCE

2116 W. Washington Blvd., "West Adams Heights"

To paraphrase a riff of Mr. Zappa's, *this house is ugly and it wants to die.* Most house-death, especially in a conspicuously depressed locale like the one where this habitation was born more than half a century ago (the beat-up stone marker a couple blocks away identifies it as West Adams Heights, a long-gone map coordinate if ever there was one), is more on the order of arthritis, angina or TB. This grim senior cit, however, has sprouted an inoperable tumor (or is it just a goiter?) that no radiation or chemotherapy could hope to cure. Said tumor, of not-so-recent vintage itself, is in the form of a prefab outdoor staircase connecting the third floor to the second, an act of carpentry no doubt encouraged by the need for separate exits that arose, somewhere down the line, when the subdivision shit finally hit the fan. That this addition and the original building were never at any time particularly compatible (in style or in substance) is made even more poignant by the naked truth of their prolonged close encounter: Even through parallel decay (an ordinarily dependable *great equalizer*) their harmony has not exactly heightened. If anything, the weight of the staircase seems to have thrown the line of its railing further out of sync with the line of the roof—unless they were that unaligned to begin with, in which case *boo hoo hoo hoo hoo.*

Meanwhile, at least two—and possibly three—TV antennas have already joined John Belushi; even without cable his reception will be great.

McFallen Arches

SPOTS HAMBURGERS

1900 S. Central Ave., "South of Downtown"

Even in full-spectrum living color this burger joint, a stone's throw south of the Santa Monica Freeway, is a pitiless apparition in gray-gray-gray, as if its touches of red and blue were more an irrelevant datum on a dusty filing card than an actual optical event. A less appealing still-in-biz roadside eatery you'd be hard-put to find, but the journal-hack in me got the better of my aesthetic aversion and I shelled out $1.69 for a Texas Chili Cheese: watery chili, cheese playing hide & seek, bone (or hoof) (or horn) in the overcooked meat, almost no onion, too much lettuce, stale roll. Not the worst I've et, but close; harsher-than-you'd-care-to-realize testimony to the fact that, amid the multilithic (and harshly nonironic) ugliness and oppressiveness of area poverty, hunger cannot be even semi-adequately sated—either literally or figuratively.

A mere ten-plus miles from the affluence-overkill of Westwood/Wilshire, this peripheral-ghetto antioasis is the perfect cipher for decoding W/W's (equally nonironic) ultimate essence as a caustically bellicose monument to inner-city imperialism ("then" and "now")—more tellingly literal than figurative, but figurative enough to make a grown poet weep. (And are those not-so-golden arches evidence that Old McDonald once resided here but, unrepentent San Berdoo WASP that he is, soon departed for greener pastures? Or are they but doomed forerunners of revealed cosmic convexity, like so many bebop saints of a forties Central Avenue farther south? Or, sadder still: a lame McDonald's immo born of naive ground-level "small bizz" competitive despair?")

Neo-Tudor w/ Lime

OFFICE BUILDING

6112 Wilshire Blvd., Miracle Mile

And then there's Neo-Tudor. All those diagonal slats, the variegated shingles, the bricks meeting at funny angles, the pointy roofs galore. A little *incongruous* maybe in so non-Euro a tanktown, but if Anthony Hopkins and Rex Harrison can make it here largely on their accents, then why not the ur-expression of breathy limey welcome-to-the-cozy-comfort? Most L.A. Neo-Tudors nestle cozily on residential streets juxtaposed with the usual assortment of bungalows and dingbats; this one is next to a shoe store and across the street from a Sizzler and a May Co. If its cheapo-crude commercial placards have failed to sufficiently "debase" its oh-so-tasteful gentry roots, its final topical reference to things lime has come through with flying colors: All wood not relegated to compulsory statements of form has been painted a gaudy-is-not-the-word *chartreuse*. Cheesy proof that, even where the sun does shine on the British Emp., the frost is terminally off the pumpkin (or some equally ridiculous well-deserved mixed metaphor).

Android Carwash Dernier Cri

LOCKHEED FEDERAL CREDIT UNION

Vanowen St. and Hollywood Way, Burbank

If they'd erected this abomination within the confines of the Burbank Airport, you'd assume you were looking at an ugly mainstream airline terminal—I mean you'd have little doubt. But its location across the street from the airport's southern boundary allows you to free-associate a little more freely. Fifties bowling alley, Orange County garden-supplies emporium, and entrance to the '68 Olympics swim stadium being but three of the many archetypes that could just as easily spring to mind. Complicating the possibility of even a fantasy I.D. on its *style* (forget, for a moment, about its *being*) is the fact that the close proximity of the airport, an active railroad track on Vanowen, and a barbed-wire fence around the structure's parking lot collectively preclude the eyeballing of the whole thing from all but the most scattered of vantage points. The trio of neo-heraldic wallforms in the photo to the left, for instance, are sequenced with an additional 10½ on just that wall alone; the vertical whatchamacallits in the pic to the right, meanwhile, which after four viewings seem to have no mechanical or structural functions whatsoever, perform even their limited visual function (a reference to carwash spires?) to but a handful of vehicles in a particularly underused section of the lot.

Signs here and there like "Unit 35" and "Effective 1-29-77 this door will be secured—*Plant Protection*," coupled with the sight of golf carts transporting sundry *material*, suggest insidious modern-age shenanigans within the heart of the whoozis, but the absence of actual mean-ass security makes A-bomb manufacture a longshot at best. The author's guess: an experimental android lab.

Doody-Colored Mystery

WOODLAND CASUAL FURNITURE
19855 Ventura Blvd., Woodland Hills

Even though it looks more like a Denny's of the future than a showroom for the bric-a-brac necessities of Valley leisure life, this nifty monstrosity falls way too short in the chandelier-ostentation department to be classed a Steven Spielberg Timewarp/Culturewarp Special, so let's ignore the obvious saucer kitsch, call it instead an equally daring reference to modified insect geometry, and label it Mutant Beehive Moderne. Four glass octagons, tinted just brown enough to couch the merchandise in doody-colored mystery, showcase an assortment of shit-to-begin-with which, to all but the most hogwild of Valley consumers, would have to seem like *silly* shit at best: silly wicker swings for silly poolside patios, silly wicker birdcages, and sillier wicker bookshelves—or are my uneducated eyes missing the tastefulness of *true rattan*? Nothing makes any more functional *sense* in the showroom than it could possibly make in the home, giving rise to a serviceable equation whereby the upper functional limits of such artifacts' store life tend to precisely equal their upper functional limits in (so-called) real life.

As if the Walter Gropius/Mies van der Rohe tradition of revealed architectural structure had been inadvertently extended to the realm of adventitious mere *content*, what you've got here is the revealed material soul of domestic suburbia—i.e., a forcible high visibility for maxi-repulsive innards (and outards) whose very *display* function (anywhere) is a gratuitous "buy me"/"I'm bought." Even the bus-stop bench on the curb is more immediately, broadly functional—and visually appealing—than the plastic/aluminum lawnchair junk conventionally strewn (outside = inside) on the sidewalk behind it.

Banco Rococo Repugnante

HOME SAVINGS

Ventura Blvd. and Amestoy Ave., Encino

No eensy weensy black-and-white's gonna tell you *what you need to know* about this amazing 1940's hideosity—so lemme try and fill you in: plenty, plenty gilt; black marble passing before-the-fact for black-tinted mirror glass; statue of a Little Black Sambo-type tiger stationed between real foliage and cement-menorah trees; statue of a leopard with only its facial spots retouched (also between ditto and ditto); metal casting of a stiff and stately woman, appearing bare-breasted until a line of dress is revealed at the neck, only her 1940's pumps letting you know for sure the reference is other than Graeco-Roman; metal casting of a mildly stooped (and apparently overworked) man, his belt not looped through his trousers but fastened instead around his dangling shirt, each of his hands firmly gripping a phallic metal shrub; glib mag-illustration mosaic of So-Cal Hispanics in a state of pre-L.A. agricultural grace, a young girl milking the family goat while dad tills the field and mom reposes (almost Manet-like) with the latest blessed addition.

Men, women, families; animals, plants, produce, wealth. None either real (except the gilt, the marble-as-marble, and some of the shrubs) or especially ideal/attractive, but each presumably called upon to play an organically integral role in a sick scenario of natural and socioeconomic "ecology" (past, present, eternal)—a role utterly precluded by everything's intense visual disparity (material, stylistic, anthropo-cultural) and static enslavement to equally disparate physical moorings. Had the scenario actually "worked," we'd be talking *Andy Hardy Bikes to Mission San Fernando* (with a Pink Panther cartoon and trailers for *Rollover* and the remake of *Lost Horizon*), so it's a good thing the "art wing" of forties banking adventure never really got *its* shit together.

Our Lady of Alienation

ST. ANNE'S CATHOLIC CHURCH of the Melkite Byzantine Rite

Moorpark St. between the Hollywood Fwy. and Elmer Ave., North Hollywood

Caesar's Palace meets Tower of Pisa meets (L.A.'s) Crossroads of the World meets Chicano Open-Air Last Supper Rug Galley, Inc. Yes, the place is goddam fucking delightful (don't get me wrong), and in *The Architecture of Humanism* Geoffrey Scott lists the three requisites of modern arch. as "firmness, commodiousness, and delight." But the total impact on the writer, after five-six willing submissions to its vast hodgepodge of forced viewing angles, could just as easily be classed one of *dazzling unattractiveness*. Such is the razor's edge the joint walks, stalks, and plods, and only external factors like your prior mood and the ambient temperature are gonna determine which way, on a given encounter, the whole thing's likely to trip, fall, and crash.

Some details: numbered and captioned biblical mosaics (highly florid), a goodly percentage illustrating parables from the far side of grim, the spelling on some betraying the artist's Hispanic orientation ("Salomon"), while on others a bizarre mock-French orientation ("glorieusly triomphant"); "inner sanctum" windows with the texture and color(s) of plastic poker-party tumblers; a Van de Kamp windmill of a cross; metal cloverleaves, more Four-H than Irish, "classical" or whatever, stapled (or simply nailed) to upper recesses of the concrete arch-tower; parking-lot enter and exit signs of highly independent prefab source.

I don't believe for a second that aliens built the pyramids (the Platonist, humanist, and cynic in me each insist that mere humans are capable of mustering the imagination and brutality such wanton monumentality requires, and I simply *hate* all that *Chariots of the Gods* bullshit whereby so-called "primitive peoples" can barely take a shit if left to their own device). But if aliens didn't build this one, I'd have to lay the causality to *alienation*: alienation from the truly radical mixed bag of etc. that gave rise to L.A.'s indigenous masterpiece of inspired multiple mania, the Watts Towers. (If dipshit commercial interests were ever called upon to erect a series of prefab equivalents of the Towers—with calculated allowances for helter-skelter "individual play" — it would probably come out St. Anne's, or something close to it, a good 35 percent of the time.)

Grimly Serious Afterword

First off, one thing to be made quite clear: This is not another "novelty piece" on the order of *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time* or any of that. Far from it: I live, you live, we all live in one incredibly ugly city.

Wilshire Boulevard from the Westwood sign at Comstock Avenue westward to the Federal Building is more hideous (by far) than the bombed-out entrails of the South Bronx, NYC. That monstrous eyesore known as Beverly Center has been triggering headaches, nausea, and attacks of creeping, screaming angst since the day it left the drawing board and entered the world of driverly optic oppression. If there is an uglier apt. bldg. in the known universe than the one at 1429 S. Bundy Drive, I have not seen it. To put it bluntly: There is something *singularly ugly* about this here City of Angels, something that will not go away, something that can't go away—because there is no remotely conceivably replacement for this blight that would not be more of same if not a hundred times, a thousand times worse.

That this singular ugliness often sits catercorner or adjacent to an equally vivid Garden-of-Edenish "beauty" may, to some, make the visual L.A. preferable to, say, the wrong side of the tracks in Newark or Calcutta. But in the final analysis it is precisely this town's no-less-singular sense of its own beauty-writ-large that has contributed the lion's share towards coloring its sprawling environs so ineradicably repulsive-unto-death. On the strictly natural side of the coin, for starters, few Angelenos have ever been able to leave the local hey-good-lookin' alone, to let it state its not-so-meager theme without weekly incursions by the lawncare rape squad. Beauty is property and, as Proudhon put it, property is theft—in this case a frighteningly ironic before-, during-, and after-the-fact theft from self. In what other town—pray tell—has visual self-denial been so unequivocally severe at the (literal) grass-roots level?

But this is really only half of a half (or a third) of the picture. To Angelenos of all stations of the property cross (even people on the outside looking in), displays of florid vanity are just as psychically a priori as their rigidly self-policed limitation. The psychic *history* of such a setup (Calvinism meets the forces of Babylon, fighting to a rigorous/decadent standstill in the hearts of *all*) I leave for glibsters like Tom Wolfe and Francis Coppola, but in any event staggering decades of incessant push-pull between abstemiousness and ostentation have left virtually no one with a clear fix anymore on either extreme, or a non-neurotic feel for the myriad (self-necessitated) parameters of any so-called "balance." We all walk a tightrope just to get through the visual encounters of a single sunlit day—and that's just talkin' primal regional *aesthetics*.

When we get to beauty-as-*commodity*, the picture perceptively darkens, dollar signs of various sizes and stenches dotting, spotting, and snakishly demarking the already-neurotic terrain. So, on one hand, no visual environment of any size, shape, or state of evocative pleasure can be considered our birthright, even provisionally: this lushly blossoming canyon earmarked for pillage; that felicitous side street leveled and carted to the dumps; the bunny rabbits of La Ballona Wetlands told to get fucked—such is our real birthright (take it or take it). And, on the other hand, one ultimately grimier and gangrenous, any and all environmental replacements going *up* can't help but be, by their very nature, nonironic *expressions* of this selfsame godsucking dollar-unleashed: grievous monuments to the ultra-tacky whims of bedwetting richfolks on both (marketing/"creative" and consumer/"art-appreciative") sides of the buck; or sucker-bait Beef Bowls and Big Boys of the "demographic" killer-subconscious. Not that the occasional condo or prefab franchise burgerpit isn't vaguely "attractive" . . . or that they should maybe have instead turned the whole thing into a Garden of Eden State Park (like try 'n' imagine the geeks who would've scored the contract to landscape *that* mutha) . . . it's just that the Hostess cupcakes our realtor-geographer friends have presumably *always* been feeding us have been looking and tasting progressively less and less like even Weber's White—let alone a passable, emotionally cost-effective loaf of whole-grain staff-of-life *nurture*.

Enter: Hollywood—the biz not the place. (I guess I'm getting glibly historical after all.) Without beauty racing beyond mere com-

modity to become an ultra-serviceable local *whore*, there really isn't much to distinguish L.A. land-capitalism from that of any other illicit-carnal-knowledgeable parcel o' turf with hills, sun, canyons, and an ocean view. Hollywood as dream merchant is master-programmer for the world capitalist conspiracy. The entire planet feels emissions of its sting, but only the de facto cowtown at its feet feels the unrelenting mass of its brutal heel . . . .

The starstruck rubes who journey "west," as much today as in the twenties and thirties, like sheep to mutton slaughter or angora fame-and-glory, or both (or, for that matter, even *neither*—a whole heap of *survivors* of the shuck are still here and not San Fran); the workaday natives and whatnot who have to read goddam *headlines* about Oscar nominations (page 13 + n anywhere else) and—who knows?—may even reap minimal dispersions of resultant economic bounty; all the sun-worshipping yoyos who bask willingly in the same blinding cosmic radiance as Eddie Albert and Elliott Gould; the fuck-faces who lie in wait to exploit the glaring (and not-so-glaring) forced weaknesses of each of the above; even the peripheral hipsters who simply can't keep their eyes off the whole revolting "Hollywood trip": These are the progeny of a system that, on a neuron-kneejerk level, teaches one to cling to—or at least keep abreast of—loathsome trend x, to believe—or at least be aware of the message—that repellant y is really alluring z, to whistle a tune of death—even if just to whistle—and call it life-everlasting.

Apply such heavy conditioning to the creation/marketing/consumption (and/or simple passive acceptance) of the ongoing debasement of visual L.A. and what you've got is a vast army of walking lobotomies who actually buy the notion that so long as there's sun there's some remote tie-in with glamour, that the hard rain of 10,000,000,000,000,000 tons of pigturd from corporate-realtor heaven must in fact be *something else*—or (recalling the Emperor's new threads) why would they *do* it to us? (That no comparable rain has yet befallen San Diego or Santa Barbara ought to be demonstration enough of where the geo-functional boundaries of the program tend, so far, to lie—the program, that is, for relieving people of their will to say no.)

An additional factor: willful suburban surrender. No program is really all that necessary (except, of course, for TV-news

linkage of Blacks, Arabs, and nuclear annihilation) to get Valley folks and their ilk scurrying for their pre-holocaust (or, perhaps, post-that-other-holocaust) womb units of easy-malignable style and uniformity. The willfully suburban nuke family has *always* sought—and found—its own tawdry elitist level. In some towns the various and sundry suburbias are truly separate from the various and sundry ghettos and centers of daytime life; in L.A., however, geographical (and, as far as the eye can determine, even class or racial) distances augur in no concrete way for material-conceptual ones. A book dealer on Melrose, for instance, is no more (no less) microscopically antiseptic about his store's facade than a homeowner in Reseda—or even Compton—is about his carport. The *whole place* is virtually one big suburban kindergarten (speaking of continued-action wombs), the me-generation "egalitarianism" of the setup being ruptured only by individual instances of economic oppression or big-score swagger. End result: the mass acceptance of shit, any shit, that packages itself as safe, sound, separate, pseudo-unique (but not drastically so), and above all *clean* (or at least cleanable).

Okay, that's the no-to-no side of the story, with passing allusions to yes-to-whatever. The part that continues to puzzle me is—you guessed it—the whatever. I'm the sort of dingaling, for inst, who can't even fathom why anybody'd wanna remake *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; yes, I understand the profit motive—Jesus H, do I understand it—but why do your profiteering on the likes of *that*? And if the new, sorry version had *been* the original and not even a lame-ass "copy"—as is in fact the case with so much *architectural* profiteering to-day (with its equally analogous bombast-over-frugality uber alles)—then I'd *really* be up shit's creek for an "explanation." To put it succinctly: If they can sell us literally anything their greedy, diabolical minds are capable of concocting, then why-why-why are they selling us (merely) an awesomely pathetic *this*? Are there no co-optable "artisans" anymore who have not been brain-damaged by the same standard etc.? (Or is that really the "wrong" question to be asking in such a milieu—and a thuddingly "bourgeois" query to boot?)

The issue of L.A. ugliness as it's specifically writ is, I'm obliged to admit, an opaque mystery to me, one as opaque as the sex life of newts or the configuration of the stars in

Ursa Major ("The Great Bear"). I don't mean to get hokey, or maybe I do; probably I'm just hungover from the chore of feeding you something as corny as the *grocery list* that is the scaffold of this, uh, guide. Anyway, each of the 17 buildings I've selected is intended as a unitary exemplar of exactly this spooky opacity—collective stuff like Westwood/Wilshire is just too fat a target, and really no more mysterious (ha) than Century City meets Miami Beach. The fact that not a single building in W/W's highrise corridor-to-the-sea is included should be read merely as evidence that not one *has anything over the others* in regard to generic revulsion; so while virtually any one of them could conceivably have been rated as "uglier" than any number of the buildings I *did* include, none of them rated that inclusion when considered in the eyeball reality of visual context-as-dealt, i.e., the architectural environment in which each has merely *contributed* to the overall puke.

By similar token, I've also excluded the aforementioned Beverly Center, even in light of its obvious heinous role in L.A.'s final solution to the question of smog (a phenomenon only relevant so long as you're accustomed to seeing forever—in every direction—every day of your driverly life); too many other "smog blockers" (the Pacific Design Center a/k/a the "Blue Whale," the entire Park La Brea development, that building at Temple and Virgil that used to house the phone company, etc., etc., etc.) are nearly equal candidates for top o' the genre — a genre that (by *my* snotty standards) is not even intrinsically intertwined with the pillar and post of L.A. eyesorehood per se.